

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY PARIS

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C O N F I D E N T I A L LONDON 14739

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, UK

SUBJECT: 1975 LIBERAL ASSEMBLY

REF: LONDON 13938

1. THE LIBERAL PARTY'S ANNUAL ASSEMBLY SEPTEMBER 15-20 AT SCARBOROUGH WAS UNEXCEPTIONAL AND DEVISED NO REALISTIC STRATEGY TO TRANSFORM THE PARTY FROM AN EXOTIC MINORITY OF ATTRACTIVE IDEALISTS INTO A MAJOR POLITICAL PARTY. ALTHOUGH ASSEMBLY DEBATES ON THE DIFFICULTIES WHICH FACE THE UK WERE GENERALLY ELEGANT AND REASONED, BRITAIN HARDLY NOTICED.

2. IN HIS FOREBODING KEYNOTE SPEECH, PARTY LEADER JEREMY THORPE BLAMED THE UK'S "NATIONAL ECONOMIC DISASTER" ON THE WILSON GOVERNMENT AND WARNED THAT THE BRITISH PEOPLE MUST EXPECT A LOWER STANDARD OF LIVING
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FOR A DECADE. HE STRESSED THE NEED FOR A PERMANENT

PRICES AND INCOMES POLICY AND SUGGESTED A NATIONAL INVESTMENT FUND TO WHICH EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES WOULD CONTRIBUTE. EXPRESSING "BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT" AT THE PARTY'S PERFORMANCE IN LAST OCTOBER'S GENERAL ELECTION, THORPE CONCLUDED BY CALLING FOR AN IMMEDIATE REFORM OF THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM AND URGING HIS COLLEAGUES TO CONTINUE THE FIGHT FOR LIBERAL POLICIES AND PARLIAMENTARY BREAKTHROUGH.

3. COMMENT: THE LIBERALS ARE FRUSTRATED AND ANGRY. PARTY POLICIES, WHATEVER THEIR MERIT, HAVE LITTLE AUDIENCE AND LESS INFLUENCE. THE PARTY HAS DROPPED BELOW TEN PERCENT IN RECENT NATIONAL OPINION POLLS. THORPE, WHOSE LEADERSHIP WAS REAFFIRMED AT SCARBOROUGH, HAS FLAWS (SEE REFTTEL) BUT IS THE BEST THE LIBERALS CAN AGREE ON. IN FACT, THE PARTY'S PRINCIPAL POLITICAL PROBLEM IS MUCH MORE PROFOUND THAN WHO LEADS IT. TO BECOME A CREDIBLE ALTERNATIVE TO LABOR AND THE TORIES AND A MAJOR POLITICAL PARTY, THE LIBERALS MUST HOLD OFFICE. AND FOR THE LIBERALS, THERE ARE THREE PATHS TO OFFICE. THEY MUST: (1) ACHIEVE THE STATURE OF THE TWO MAJOR PARTIES, WHICH WOULD REQUIRE UNDER THE PRESENT SYSTEM A FUNDAMENTAL REALIGNMENT OF THE BRITISH ELECTORATE; (2) PARTICIPATE IN A COALITION GOVERNMENT (A STEP MANY LIBERALS WOULD REGARD AS A FAITHLESS REPUDIATION OF THEIR IDEALS); OR (3) SUCCEED AT FORCING ELECTORAL REFORM. ALL THESE POSSIBILITIES ARE REMOTE.

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